

## Personnel Security and the Climate of Public Opinion

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To preserve America's military security and economic well-being the government maintains secrecy surrounding some of the nation's military capabilities and plans; critical technologies; financial, trade or economic policy information; and proprietary economic information. Security programs, specifically personnel security procedures, exist to assure that access to secrets is given only to individuals who will not disclose them to competitors or adversaries, either unintentionally or intentionally. Applicants for access to classified government information go through a vetting process in which their background is reviewed and a determination is made whether to give access. In this determination consideration is given to the likelihood that an applicant will maintain proper

secrecy. This process attempts either to weed out individuals who should not be given access to secret information or to deter them from seeking employment in positions that require such access.

By its very nature the personnel security vetting process encroaches on personal privacy. Decisions to entrust secrets to some individuals and not others is based on a background investigation into areas such as criminal arrests, drug use and financial/credit history. Once cleared for access to secret information, an individual's continuing eligibility for access is monitored through periodic reinvestigations that may include financial disclosure as well as drug and polygraph testing.

Of interest in the present study is the extent to which the current government personnel security vetting process is in synch with the climate of public opinion. Does the public believe there is a need for the government to keep some information secret? Does the public support investigating various areas of one's personal history before giving access to secrets? Or are these background checks viewed as an assault on personal freedom and unnecessary intrusion into the private lives of individuals? Public attitudes on these questions are important because they affect the passage of legislation and the issuance of government regulations about permissible security measures such as personnel security investigations.

Smith (1994) found that the public is concerned that the government classifies too many documents as secret and top secret. His findings also suggested, however, that US citizens favor maintaining a high level of secrecy surrounding technology with military uses. In addition, respondents generally favored the government's right to collect detailed background information before giving an individual access to classified information. Respondents also strongly favored reporting of employees who are violating security procedures. Overall the results indicated substantial public support for strong personnel security measures.

There still is reason to be concerned about the level of public support for personnel security measures. With the end of the Cold-war, foreign threats to national security are

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widely perceived as diminished. These threats have been replaced by greater international cooperation and openness. Has public support for personnel security measures declined with the dramatic changes in the political and military realities in recent years? The present research was conducted to determine the extent to which the public still believes there is a need for secrecy surrounding certain government activities and is supportive of various personnel security measures designed to protect secrets.

## Method

Data were collected as part of the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS was selected as the instrument for gathering these data because of its high scientific quality and because it contains numerous attitudinal and behavior batteries pertinent to the security items. For example, this instrument contains standard background variables (e.g., age, years of school and highest degree obtained, race and ethnicity, etc.) and demographics such as nativity for respondent and parents, military service, and parental and current family stability. Pertinent attitudinal items include measures of confidence in the government and the military, support for civil liberties for deviant and extremist groups, political ideology, alienation and cynicism.

A pool of items tapping the areas of interest were developed and pretested. Based on the results of the pretest, items were revised for inclusion in the GSS. The GSS was fielded in early 1996 to a full-probability sample of the adult household population of the United States. The sample size for this study was 1500.

## Results

Table 1 reports the percentage of respondents who think that to maintain America's leadership in the world the US government should maintain a high level of secrecy surrounding technology with military uses. As can be seen, 71% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the need for secrecy.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Respondents Agreeing with the Need for Secrecy**

Question: In order to maintain America's leadership in the world, the government should maintain a high level of secrecy surrounding technology with military uses. Do you...	
Strongly agree	31.3
Agree	39.8
Neither Agree or Disagree	9.8
Disagree	11.8
Strongly disagree	4.1
DON'T KNOW	3.2

Table 2 reports the percentage of respondents who believe that the government protects too many documents by classifying them as secret and top secret. Approximately 55% of those responding agreed or strongly agreed with the view that the government protects too many documents as secret and top secret.

**Table 2****Percentage of Respondents Agreeing that Secrecy is Over-used**

Question: Given the world situation, the government protects too many documents by classifying them as secret and top secret. Do you:	
Strongly agree	13.6
Agree	41.6
Neither Agree or Disagree	14.6
Disagree	19.9
Strongly disagree	4.1
DON'T KNOW	6.2

Table 3 summarizes the percentage of respondents who favor the government maintaining a high level of secrecy surrounding various government activities. Respondents generally agree that the government should keep secret diplomatic initiatives, military operations and efforts to control domestic terrorism. Although support was somewhat lower, the majority of respondents agree that the US intelligence budget should be secret.

**Table 3****Percentage of Respondents Favoring Secrecy of Certain Government Activities**

Question: Should or should not the government maintain a high level of secrecy surrounding:					
	Definitely should	Probably should	Probably should not	Definitely should not	DON'T KNOW
Diplomatic initiatives	33.7	39.3	12.3	4.7	10.0
Military operations	57.8	29.1	6.7	3.0	3.4
Efforts to control domestic terrorism	57.5	25.6	7.9	4.9	4.1
The US intelligence budget	26.2	27.2	24.1	16.5	6.0

Table 4 summarizes the percentage of respondents who favor the government's right to ask individuals detailed personal background questions in a number of areas. Respondents generally agree that the government should have the right to collect this information in all areas except sexual orientation. On this issue only about 47% of the respondents reported that the government should collect information regarding sexual orientation before giving an individual a secret or top secret security clearance.

**Table 4****Percentage of Respondents Favoring Government's Right to Collect Personal Background Information**

Question: Before giving an individual a secret or top secret clearance, the government should have the right to ask him or her detailed, personal questions in the following areas:					
	Definitely should	Probably should	Probably should not	Definitely should not	DON'T KNOW
Criminal arrests & convictions	88.2	8.5	1.3	.4	1.6
Illegal drug use	85.6	10.2	2.1	.8	1.3
Mental health history	78.5	16.5	2.6	.5	1.9
Alcohol use	70.0	21.8	4.6	1.9	1.7
Financial & credit history	51.0	28.4	10.4	7.8	2.4
Foreign relatives & friends	48.4	30.3	12.9	5.2	3.2
Sexual orientation	28.6	18.7	26.8	22.5	3.4

Table 5 summarizes the percentage of respondents who favor the government contacting other people to verify the accuracy of financial and tax information provided by an individual in the course of a security investigation. Roughly three-fourths of those responding agree that the government should verify an individual's financial assets and liabilities as well as tax records. About two-thirds of the respondents favor verifying financial assets and liabilities of the spouse of an individual before giving him or her a security clearance.

**Table 5****Percentage of Respondents Agreeing that Financial Information Provided be Independently Verified by the Government**

Question: Before giving an individual a secret or top secret clearance, the government should contact other people and verify information provided by the individual concerning his or her:					
	Definitely should	Probably should	Probably should not	Definitely should not	DON'T KNOW
Financial assets & liabilities	47.5	28.8	11.9	8.5	3.3
Tax records	46.2	30.8	11.8	8.0	3.2
Spouse's financial assets and liabilities	37.2	29.9	17.8	11.7	3.4

Table 6 shows that nearly 67% of the respondents favor the government's right to know whether or not an individual has ever consulted a mental health professional as well as the general nature of the diagnosis and counseling by the mental health professional before giving him or her a security clearance. About 41% also favor the government's right to know specific information revealed in confidence to the mental health

professional. Only about 7% of respondents indicate that the government has no right to information about an individual's emotional or mental health before giving him or her a security clearance.

Table 6

**Percentage of Respondents who Favor the Government's Right to Collect Emotional or Mental Health Information**

<p>Question: Please tell me which one of the following statements describes what the government has the right to know. Before giving an individual a secret or top secret clearance, the government should have the right to know.</p>	
- Nothing about an individual's emotional or mental health	6.7
- Whether or not an individual is currently consulting a mental health professional	12.2
- Whether or not an individual has ever consulted a mental health professional	8.6
- Whether or not an individual has ever consulted a mental health professional, and the general nature of the diagnosis and counseling by the mental health professional	25.7
- Whether or not an individual has ever consulted a mental health professional, the general nature of the diagnosis and counseling by the mental health professional, and the specific information revealed in confidence to the mental health professional	40.8
- DON'T KNOW	6.0

### Discussion

The following conclusions can be drawn from these data. First, despite concern that the government classifies too many documents as secret and top secret, US citizens favor maintaining a high level of secrecy surrounding technology with military uses, diplomatic initiatives, military operations, and efforts to control domestic terrorism. While the level of support is somewhat lower, the majority of US citizens favor keeping the US intelligence budget secret. Second, with the exception of personal questions regarding one's sexual orientation, the majority of citizens favor the government's right to ask personal detailed background questions before giving an individual a security clearance. Third, about two-thirds of the public agree that the government should independently verify financial and tax information provided by individuals before giving a security clearance. Fourth, citizens favor the government's right to detailed information about an individual's emotional or mental health before giving an individual a security clearance.

The findings for the items in the survey that were administered in both 1994 and 1996 are consistent. From 1994 to 1996 there was a very small increase (0.6%) in the percentage of respondents who expressed concern that the government classifies too many documents as secret and top secret. During the same period there was a modest decrease (3.9%) in the percentage of respondents who favor maintaining a high level of

secrecy surrounding technology with military uses. From 1994 to 1996 the degree of support for the government's right to ask detailed background questions remained virtually the same. Thus, the public continues to favor the government's right to such information despite reduced military tensions and a climate of greater international openness. It is interesting to note that the 1996 survey results revealed that approximately 41% of citizens support the government's right to specific information revealed in confidence to a mental health professional before giving an individual a security clearance. It is not the current policy of the Department of Defense to seek this level of detailed and confidential information.

The data in this study suggest that, despite changes in the political and military realities in recent years, US citizens generally continue to agree with the need to keep certain government activities secret. They also favor the government's right to ask detailed, personal questions before giving an individual a security clearance. It appears that the current government personnel security policy in this area is in synch with the climate of public opinion.

## References

Smith, T. (November 1994). *Public attitudes towards security and counter-espionage matters in the post cold-war period*. Monterey, CA: Defense Personnel Security Research Center.

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<sup>1</sup>The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense.

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